

UNHEARD VOICES AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION OF DALIT WOMEN IN BAMA FAUSTINA'S SANGATI

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ABSTRACT

Despite civilization stepping in 21st century, the caste discrimination as Dalit still prevails in the country like India. However, many movements came in the way to stop this age old-practice ultimately resulting in construction of strict laws against it. The term Dalit represents all the lower castes, tribal people, labor classes and women who have been broken and crushed down by the dominant classes as an intentional conduct. This paper aims to draw attention to the insensitive realism of the repression, struggle, torture and miserable lives of Dalit women. Dalit women are discriminated at three levels. Firstly they are treated as untouchables and as outcastes, due to their lower caste, secondly they have to face male chauvinism and thirdly they have to go through financial scarcity due to potholed salary inequality and poorly paid employment. Even though the Indian constitution has tried to wipe out untouchability but Dalit women are still marginalized suffering indescribable coercion at every level, their voices are still unheard and their feminine identities are still deconstructed. This paper attempts to put forward the harsh reality described by Bama Faustina, in her work Sangati, a saga of a young girl's individual struggle to the consciousness of a community of Paraiya women, a neighborhood group of friends and relations and further their joint struggle as Dalit women to construct their gender identity. The paper also explores how their unheard voices are brought together collectively by Bama Faustina narrating the issues and happenings of their real lives which are full of challenges, risks and struggle.

KEYWORDS: Dalit Women, Gender Identity, Untouchability & Male Chauvinism

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INTRODUCTION

I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.

- B. R. Ambedkar

Despite civilization stepping in 21st century, the caste discrimination as Dalit still prevails in the society of country like India. However, many movements came in the way to stop this age old-practice ultimately resulting in construction of strict laws against it.

Dalit is a prevalent deep-rooted marginalized group specifically allocating those social sections of Indian society that are culturally, socially and physically subdued by governing sections, and preserved by desirable quality of a customary, unfair, iniquitous and hierarchical socio-cultural exemption in the form of subservient marginality called “untouchability”.

In the introduction to the book *Sangati*, Lakshmi Holmstrom says that the term ‘Dalit’ which means ‘oppressed’ was initially used in India instead of ‘Scheduled Castes’ (lower castes), further “gained common currency” with “the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972”. (Sangati: xi) Nowadays, it broadly represents all the

lower castes, tribal people, labor classes and women who have been broken and crushed down by the dominant classes, in deliberate behavior. In her article Soumitra Chakraborty says,

“Bending low under the crushing arrogance of higher strata of caste for thousands of years, and with all avenues of a life of dignity closed to them, these communities have repeatedly wondered about rationale of their condition, cried out for sympathy and revolted for human dignity. A powerful expression of such activism is Dalit literature.” (Chakraborty: 255)

These expressions in the form of different genres- prose, poetry, short stories, novel, drama, autobiographies and documentaries are either translated into English from regional languages or written in English. Such dominant voices that express the *“revolt of the caste-based violation of human rights”* have gradually gained their *“well-deserved space in the arena of English Literature”*. (Chakraborty: 255) K. A. Geetha has listed these literary voices as *“revolutionary discourse”*. (Geetha: 411) Hence Raj Gauthaman conveys about Dalit literature that it came out of Dalit uprising as, *“part and parcel of anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interests of social justice, and political protests for economic equality”*. (Gauthaman: 96)

Observation of whole number of Dalit states that in Dalit, Dalit women constitute almost half of India's 160 million Dalit; comprise about 16% of India's total women and 8% of the total population of the country. (<https://www.myind.net/dalit-women-literature-2000-2014>)

Dalit movements are largely controlled by men in the country, which have always marginalized problems regarding Dalit women. In addition, they are politically, religiously and economically isolated apart from many women's movements held in the country in regard of women's right. Dalit women's issues were put forward neither by Dalit male leaders as Dalit in general nor by Non-Dalit Feminists in particular against the suppression and sufferings of Dalit women. Although as Dalit, they have a shared platform with Dalit men against caste discrimination and as women they also have a joint platform against gender discrimination, but they are sidelined by both kind of movements feminist or Dalit. Dalit women exerted to create a new specific platform for them so they can talk about their experiences of sufferings in specific.

Henceforth Dalit feminism rose up due to caste and gender discrimination as Dalit women who were *“compelled to voice their despair”*. (Sailpar: 478) These Dalit women writers' perspective towards undergoing the atrocities and suppression has changed to great extent that's why they posed questions related to Dalit women's problems and mindset of patriarchal society with a demand for solutions.

Ostracism of Dalit women and their unheard voices against sufferings triggered the Dalit feminist writers to stand up and take *“the stance of making the voice of the unheard find a place for echo”*. (www.myind.net/dalit-women-literature-2000-2014) Some of these writers are Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Goga Syamala, G. Vijaya Lakshmi, M M Vinodini, Jajula Gowri and Bama Faustina who came up with their writings to express their desire for their social and ethical right to have equal opportunities in the society.

K. A. Geetha admits that Dalit feminist literature exposes the myriad of problems besetting Dalit women, compounded by caste, gender, and class structures. (Geetha: 411) Bama Faustina has also used literature as a tool for an expression of patriarchal imbalances and sufferings they face by writing her first novel *Karukku* as an individual's fictional autobiography and her second work *Sangati* as an autobiography of whole Dalit women community. Anshu Sailpar says in her article that being a supporter of Dalit Feminism, Bama has articulated *“the travails and sufferings of Dalit women”* in

Sangati which gained it acknowledgment as “one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Dalit woman.” (Sailpar: 479)

Sangati: A Feminist Discourse

Sangati second work of Bama Faustina, a Dalit Feminist writer, was first published in Tamil in 1994, and then translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom in English, acknowledged by critics as radically new and different writing; exclusively positioned for contributing both to Dalit movements and to the women's movements. It draws autobiographical material creating an interestingly new literary form that has no usual plot. The word ‘*Sangati*’ means news, events, happenings and the book is a series of interconnected anecdotes of Paraiya women community and about the shared struggle. In the introduction to the book, Lakshmi Holmstrom said that *Sangati* tells “real-life stories of risks taken, and of challenge, choice, and change”. (Bama: xv) Nonetheless Bama has also made her intention clear saying that her mind was flooded with,

“many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self confidence and self respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labor. I wanted to shout out their stories.” (Bama: ix)

Bama further says that she wanted people to know about their lives so this venture *Sangati* is produced “out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervor and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society.” (Bama: ix) Tharu and Lalita, in *Women Writing in India*, point to a number of autobiographies written by women writers keeping their texts in a contemporary genre of writing calling such texts “a personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experiences as “individuals”, as whose specific lives were of interest and importance”. (Tharu & Lalita: 160)

The stories and remembrances of personal experiences are narrated in first person further counterpointed by the generalized statements of the grandmother and mother figures and by Bama's own reflections as author-narrator. In the early chapters, there is a young girl of twelve years with her grandmother Paatti that has a reflective voice in the few chapters when looks back and meditates upon her past experience as a young woman. The young girl is Bama herself who re-narrates the reflective stories from past; told by her grandmother to her and what she had observed while growing young. The reflections have a Dalit feminist perspective with a real-world call for act.

Like Simone De Beauvoir, a French feminist writer, Bama being the same in India for Dalit women, complaints in contradiction of all kinds of repression trusting on the power and toughness of Dalit women, exerts for “change and self-empowerment through education and collective action”. (Sailpar: 479) In the preface of *Sangati*, Bama voices,

“Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live. In Sangati, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem filled lives and quickly stanching their tears. Sangati is a look at a part of the lives of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this they find the courage to revolt.” (Bama: vii)

Bama further expresses that *Sangati* has its theme about “the growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women” which has transformed her life also. She further admits, “in times of trouble, boredom, and depression, the urge grew to demolish the troubles and to live happily. To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my deepest desire, and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow.” (Bama: vii)

Through *Sangati*, Bama attempts to draw attention to the insensitive realism of the repression, struggle and torture Dalit women face every day because of their miserable lives. In many South Asian countries like India, Dalit women are discriminated at three levels; firstly they are treated as untouchables and as outcastes, due to their lower caste, secondly they have to face male chauvinism and finally they have to go through financial scarcity due to potholed salary inequality and poorly paid employment.

Low Caste Treatment and Toils

Dalit women have to undertake low class treatment by upper class man as both- a Dalit and as women. As Dalit and women, they collectively face the threat of sexual molestation and rape from upper caste men where Dalit men also become incapable to safeguard their women from these leading powers, a position which can be noticed as “collective and vulnerable”. (Geetha: 2012) So Dalit women try to counsel directly or indirectly their young girls to be aware and have precautions for such things not to ever happen. In *Sangati*, while going out to gather firewood, the narrator’s grandmother advised her that women should never go alone to the fields and forests. She further tells, “If upper-caste fellow clap eyes on you, you are finished. They’ll drag you off and rape you that’s for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantations. They keep themselves well hidden. You must never let them see you either.” (Bama: 8)

Although upper caste men don’t treat them as equals, they keep their eyes on a Dalit woman or girl to molest or abuse with a mindset that she doesn’t have a right to ask for justice against them. Activist Rolly Shivhare said in the newspaper Hindustan Time that the increase in sexual harassment and violence is due to old-fashioned and patriarchal mindset. (www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/mp-women-safety-in-the-red-but-govt-talks-pink/story) Growing up as a Dalit girl or women equally a tormenting experience as they are frequently risked with being assaulted by upper caste men leading them to have perilous life.

Mariamamma, a young girl, narrator’s cousin, confront such situation while gathering firewood. She innocently went to drink some water from a pump-set shed in an upper caste man Kumarasami Ayya’s fields where he “seized her hand and pulled her inside. Frightened out of her wits, she left everything and ran home, hardly knowing how she escaped.” (Bama: 20) Later she tells to her friends but they silenced her and warned,

“it is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you’ll find that it is you who will get the blame; it’s you who will be called a whore he’s an upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?” (Bama: 20)

On the other hand Kumarasami felt scared that his reputation might be ruined so he hurriedly came back to the village and complained to the Headman of Pariaya community, the Naattaamai about Matiamamma that he saw the girl with an another lower caste boy, Manikkam in his fields, where both of them were behaving in a very dirty way. In such manipulative way, he shielded his own name and threw the lower caste girl and boy in fire with false allegations. The Headman immediately called a meeting of the villagers. Mariamma and Manikkam were brought in the centre with

folded arms. One lower caste woman from the group of women tried to tell the truth but was silenced by few men in such abusive words, *"will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you?"* (Bama: 23)

Women are not supposed to raise their voices in the meetings held by men even though Mariamma also tried to tell what had exactly happened but again some men from the gathering shouted at her to shut up calling her a slut who promptly wanted to stick all the blames on Kumarasami. They advised the Naattaamai, *"there's no us questioning her. Just decide how much to fine her. It's only that way we can stop these girls from acting like whores."* (Bama: 24) No one objected and tried to listen the girl's point of view. Even her own father got angrier and ordered her to ask for forgiveness but she did not utter a word being half dead and beaten by her father. Few women muttered about her father having a mistress and no one called a meeting for that as they say, *"he's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it; if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's one justice for man and quite another for women."* (Bama: 24)

Dalit women have to face both gender and caste favoritism at every stage in their lives. Even in this Mariamma's case, nobody had beaten up the boy Manikkam. In addition, Mariamma was asked to pay a fine of Rs 200 and Manikkam a fine of Rs 100, less than her. None of them tried to find out the truth knowingly or unknowingly as Kumarasami was the one behind this all who did something wrong. Lower caste men would never question Kumarasami even if he was really at fault. They were scared as upper caste men can call police and they will be beaten up to a pulp like it has happened before also.

Mariamma story is a representative story of all those Dalit girls and women who are unable to protest and get justice against such assaults and abuses. There were many low whispers in the group of women who talked about Kumarasami's misconduct with their daughters and granddaughters but no one could dare to tell since *"whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman."* (Bama: 24)

Bama further observed that only women: Dalit women in particular became possessed by peys. When her grandmother tells her stories of women dancing in a frenzy way or becoming possessed by peys, she observed that upper caste women aren't possessed by peys or danced in a frenzy. She questions why the peys only set on women of her community. Bama examined the scheduled of Dalit women and told that *"from the moment they wake up, they set to work...at home they are pestered by their husbands and children: in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord."* (Bama: 59) Even after coming home no time they get for rest and she further explained, *"even if a women's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his satisfaction."* (Bama: 59) Crumpled by *"disgust, boredom and exhaustion"*, mentally weak Dalit women further *"succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys."* (Bama: 59)

Bama raises issues related to health of Dalit women and bias treatment due to their lower caste as there are *"no other conveniences nor special arrangements for pregnant women"* of her community. (Bama: 90) There are no specific diets guidelines or medicines provided to them. They *"eat their usual kanji, go to work as always, return to the fields five or six days after the delivery."* (Bama: 90) Many of them die while working because they have babies at home to feed and they have to work without proper medical care. Bama expresses her grievances saying that *"neither nurses nor doctors will come into our streets as willingly as they go to"* other streets of upper caste people. (Bama: 90)

In case of rights of voting, Bama tells that women of her community are ignorant about their rights of voting and its power. Bama shows her irritation in the lines-

“However much we strain to leap forward, caste holds us down like a taproot. It is at the centre of religion, politics, education, and every other wretched thing. In our streets, most importantly women never have anything to do with this stinking party politics. They don’t care who comes and who goes. They know they have to look after their stomachs themselves.” (Bama: 102-103)

The women are in worse position and most of them don’t go for voting due to loss of that day’s wage what they will loose if they go to voting booth. When she asks her grandmother about whom did she give her vote, her Paatti says, *“as if my vote alone make is going to such a difference! How does it actually matter, whether we even vote or not? Who’s going to change the writing on our foreheads?”* (Bama: 98) Further Bama regrets on the mentality of men in her community as they choose a party according to people’s caste and money who are running that party. Political parties misuse even our men giving them *“a couple of paisa”* or *“a drink by a party worker”* to *“run some trivial errand.”* (Bama: 103)

Entertaining themselves like going to cinema is also such a frightening thing for Dalit women as Paatti tells, *“all sort of fellows go to cinema”* and *“if any of those will grab”* one of their women or *“assault her then it will lead to a fight.”* (Bama: 105) When Bama asks her grandmother if women from other caste go to cinema then why can’t they go. Paatti replies, *“because they have caste-power, money, everything. And what do we have? Even if a fellow assaults one of us, it’s difficult to stand to him or make an enemy of him.”* (Bama: 105) This is the tragedy that they cannot fight with upper caste men for long as they again have to go to them for the work. Thus their men restrict them going to cinema or any other public place for amusement.

The angst of the upper class women is also directed towards them and they become the worst sufferer. Although upper caste women also face gender discrimination but still according to Bama, *“upper caste women show us no pity or kindness either, if only as women to women, but treat us with contempt, as if we are creatures of a different species, who have no sense of honour or self respect.”* (Bama: 66)

Gender Inequalities and Domestic Violence

“Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into text-as into the world and into history- by her own movement.” (Cixous: 347)

Woman being half completes the society but unfortunately still not given her rights of equality by man ubiquitously including India. Although her position has been changing from ages, she still endures the burden of being suppressed hence her voice remained unheard and unnoticed for centuries. Neena Arora adds in this context, *“one fact common to almost all societies is that woman has never been considered the equal of man.”* (Arora: 8) Though Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has pointed to the variability in the concept of women’s identity in Indian society, and to the power inequalities with differences in their sufferings levels that exist between different groups of women with differing castes-classes, under the blanket notion of gender.

Within their community; male dominance prevails, the power rests in the hands of men: caste-courts and churches are led by men with a set of different rules for men and women. *“She writes of the violent treatment of women by fathers, husbands, and brothers, and she describes the violent domestic quarrels which are carried out publicly, where sometimes women fight back.”* (Holmstrom: Sangati xvii)

Bama depicts meticulously the reality of community how boys are treated with more respect and care than girls. If the boy infant in the family cries or catches illness or fever, he is *"instantly picked up and given milk"* and treated with the greatest care but for girl it is done *"half-heartedly"*. (Bama: 7) When the children grow up little more, boys are allowed to eat what they wish for and to play whole day but girls have to stay at home to work all the time, *"cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and so on"*. (Bama: 7) Moreover girls can't play boys games and they can just play games of *"cooking or getting married: they play games with stones and shells"*, if they try to play games of boys people say in abusive and mocking tone, *"who does she think she is? She's just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boys' games."* (Bama: 7) Their roles are quite distinctive as while playing *"mothers and fathers"* girls have to serve the boys rice at first and get the criticism with blows regarding the taste of food (Bama: 31) When they played *"buses"* boys will be the drivers and conductors who allow the girls to enter in the bus by shouting at them. (Bama: 31) When they played *"husbands and wives"*, boys were always authoritative taking *"the roles of policemen and shop owners"*. (Bama: 31)

The narrator tells about her grandmother that her Paatti was also not an exception in all this discrimination between her grandsons and granddaughters. She tells that after coming back home first her Paatti calls her grandsons for the eatables to give whatever she brought with her. Further the narrator tells,

"if she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her finger-nails, since she had n teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skin." (Bama: 7-8)

Dalit girls *"before they can sprout three tender leaves"*, have to take responsibilities on their shoulders when they are supposed to go to schools. (Sangati: 75) Maikkanni, a little young girl of the age to get education in school, forced to work hence her mother delivers a baby and can't continue going to fields for work. Therefore Maikkanni takes charges of family expenses and goes to work. After her mother recovers, they take turns and now she stays at home to take care of the newborn baby whereas her mother starts going to fields. Geetha and Srilata express their grievance saying that Maikkanni's miserable condition is symbolic of the gender *"prejudice governing the lives of Dalit girls"*. (Geetha K. A. & K. Srilata: 2007)

Mariamamma, the poor girl after lots of false accusations and brutally beaten, being *"made the scapegoat"* was married to the same Manikkam with whom she was falsely claimed to be found in objectionable state by upper caste Kumarasami. (Bama: 42) Manikkam, a drunkard who never went to work and had been jailed seven or eight times made her suffer blows and kicks and beatings every day from the time she was married too him. Bama shows her anguish and anger saying that,

"If a woman is slandered, that's always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the women to speak out. They'll marry her off to any disreputable fellow and wash their hands off her, not caring in the least whether she lives or dies." (Bama: 42)

Bama gave many examples of such women who faced physical violence and brutality every day. Another example- Thaayi, a lightest skinned woman who was to marry a man she did not like. (Bama: 42) Never did a day go when her husband let her go without beating. He *"used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal with a stick or with his belt."* (Bama: 42) The narrator after watching red weals on Thaayi's light skin, came to her mother and

questioned, *“just because he’s tied a tali round her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as he likes?”* (Bama: 43) Bama reveals the patriarchal attitude of the society towards marriages through the narrator’s mother’s reply: *“it’s not so easy to get away, once you are married. Once your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on the earth at last.”* (Bama: 44)

Most of Dalit men in the community beat their wives regularly. Bama further tells that a man *“goes off with the money he has earned, he drinks as much as he likes, eats in coffee-stands and food-stalls”*, then he tries to snatch the wages the women earn to *“fill the her children’s bellies”*. (Bama: 63) Men can spend their wages, as they want but women have to manage everything at their homes with their wages. If men don’t have money and they ask for, if she refuses to give, she is tortured and brutally beaten up inhumanly even if she is full term pregnant. Such domestic violence every second woman faces in the community. What Bama practically perceived through such cases that *“all that violence was because of there was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority”* being Dalit men they have to behave like *“dogs with their tails rolled up”* in the fields in front of their landlords. (Bama: 65) So whatever *“suppressed anger”* and *“strength”* they have, *“vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp.”* (Bama: 65)

Destined to face problems and discrimination, Dalit girls are not allowed marrying the man they choose for them. There is another story of Essaki who ran away to another town and married a man of her choice without the agreement of her family people. Her brothers found her when she was pregnant and settled with her husband. They came to her place and exhibited their affection for the coming baby in the family and insisted her to come back home for bay’s delivery. She trusted and came but they killed her and the baby brutally in the jungle. This is what how community doesn’t approve freedom of women.

Towards such injustices, Bama expresses her displeasure saying that, *“if a man marries outside his caste, it is nothing. But if a girl marries outside, the honour and pride of the whole community is lost.”* (Bama: 109) Further she tells that men of her community can’t even stand the idea of educating girls. *“If a girls studies a little, writes a little, or dares to speak up in public places”*, men won’t digest it and exhibit their discontent, *“whatever it is, she is only a woman.”* (Bama: 109) Everything should happen according to men’s *“pleasure”* and *“convenience”* and if anything happens what women desire for them, men will *“leap between heaven and earth to prevent it.”* (Bama: 110) The deep-rooted mentality that women *“must not cross the line”*, men draw for them and the males’ dominance over them should be changed what Bama has attempted to input through this feminist discourse. (Bama: 110)

Economic Discrimination at Work Place

Sangati highlights the way patriarchy works in case of Dalit women as wage earners including financial inequality and exploitation. They are depicted as daily wage laborers who work at agricultural sites, building sites and at factories but given less salary than what men get. Hitherto the amount men earn after work, they are free to spend however they feel happy to spend, whereas women have to bear all the financial burden of running the family including all the expenditures, mostly single-handedly. Moreover they have to hear abusive language and face voluptuous stalking at the work sites. Fredrick & Atkinson admit,

“certain stereotypical or biased views of women and men influence attitudes and behavior in the workplace and unfortunately, can lead to sexual harassment.” (Fredrick & Atkinson: 47)

When Mariamma hears that some builders are digging wells will give good wages. She went to ask for work as it suited only to youngsters. Although it meant hard labour, Mariamma went there *"hoping to pick up a few coins which would later help to fill"* her family's stomach. (Bama: 17) Men were paid more than women even when they did the same work there, *"even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more"*. (Bama: 18) One day Mariamma fell in the deep dug well while carrying away a basket of rubble. Anyhow she managed to survive with no external wounds but bones inside were fully crushed. Shelayon bed in the hospital suffering severely from her neck to feet covered in plaster, but she was not paid any medical reparation from upper-caste well builders. That fits to the miserable situation of Mariamma what Paatti tells to her granddaughter, *"we have to labour hard in the fields as hard as men do, and then top of that, struggle to bear and raise children.... If you are born into this world, it is best you are born as a man. Born as women, what good do we get?"* (Bama 6-7)

Dalit women have to suffer and earn enough however the situation is to feed their family their routine *"kanji"*. (Bama: 19) About such type of Dalit women laborers, Social alert suggests, these *"are women or girls for whom work is a means of survival rather than a personal choice"*. (Social alert: 2000, 8) Being Dalit and women have to accept dual exploitation in terms of *"the inadequacy of pay, the long working days, no regulations in relation to rest, arbitrary dismissals"*, where society needs to *"alter attitudes and insensitivity to gender issues"* by re-educating people related to work ethics. (Social alert: 2000, 8 & Fredrick & Atkinson: 47)

Such economic discrimination and tension of not having permanent employment further make women aggressive with a sharp tongue. Psychological and physical strains lead them to raise their voices in anger or in pain, sometimes against each other or sometimes against the oppressors, mostly any male in the family. Lakshmi Holmstrom supports such behavior by saying that *"hard labor and financial unevenness leads to a culture of violence, this is theme that Bama explores boldly throughout the book."* (Holmstrom: Sangati xvii)

Disparities in Sufferings of Dalit Women and Upper Caste Women

Though women in general are subjected to atrocities everywhere in India, Dalit women' pains are remarkably different from those of upper-caste women. In some areas they suffer more than upper cast women and in some they possess certain freedom with some positivity as compared below:

- **Dowry Practice:** In Dalits, *"there is no snatching and grabbing in the name of dowry"* and people can give to their daughters whatever they have. (Bama: 89) Moreover men give parisam, a bride price according to his ability to give. Though dowry practice is highly in trend in upper class communities where they have to arrange many jewels and house hold items for the bride.
- **Divorce and Re-Marriage:** Dalit women can end their marriages in some of Dalit communities but not in all. What Bama tells that upper caste women can't think of ending their marriages in *"their wildest dreams"* as *"a tali round the neck is the end of the story"* and have to stay with her husband until she dies. (Bama: 93) Dalit women are not bound to wear *tali* or other jewellery regularly as other communities' women are bound to. They are not even bound to wear white saris after the death of husband as upper caste women have to. Upper caste women can't wear *"flowers"* or *"jewels"* and *"coloured saris"* after the death of husband. (Bama: 112) Even Dalit widows can remarry if they choose.

- **Domestic Violence:** Upper caste women suffer differently face less violence as they “*submit to their men all the time and are shut in and controlled, like snakes locked up in the boxes.*” (Bama: 111) However Dalit women are more independent who don’t submit them to their husbands and fight against violence with their sharp tongue.
- **Financial Independence:** Dalit women are hard worker and earn their own money even they have few coins in their hands as their wages but still they don’t “*hold their palms to their husbands for every little expense*” like upper caste women. (Bama: 66) Though upper class women surrender due to the money and facilities their husbands provide them.
- **Female Foeticide and Infanticide:** Bama has hit the society with this burning issue comparing her community with upper class society. Bama starts *Sangati* with a proverb, “*if the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold.*” (Bama: 3) This is what her community people think and accept the child whether girl or boy although later while parenting they become more concerned about the boys. Unfortunately what she tells about upper class people that they “*grieve if a girl child is born as if it’s a funeral*” as they will have to “*give big dowries and bear all the cost when they get a girl married.*” (Bama: 115) Bama reveals her disappointment that “*the cruel parents will even kill the infant without any mercy or compassion*” at some places. (Bama: 115)

In *Sangati*, Bama has examined well the disparities between Dalit women and upper-caste women, their different needs and their different ways to respond to suppression and atrocities with different surviving tactics. Although Dalit women are suppressed more but still there are some principles which Bama respects and approves in Dalit women are not the traditional feminine ideals, upper-caste women possess such as fear, shyness, simplicity and modesty, but rather they have ideals of courage, fearlessness, independence, and self-esteem to fight and assert for their rights. Bama appreciates Dalit women whatever they do, from the little girl Maikkanni who takes care of her mother and her family and supports financially by working in a matchbox factory, to the old Sammuga Kizhavi who discovers means of mocking at the upper caste landlord and many more examples. (Holmstrom: *Sangati* xix)

A positive cultural identity of Dalit women exists throughout the book resisting the upper caste norms and “*in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter.*” (Bama: 75) If there are stories of hardship told by Vellaiyamma Kizhavi, there are others with a constructive vibe from every day happenings like women working together, preparing and eating food, to celebrating and singing on occasions of coming-age-ceremony, a betrothal where gifts are given to bride by groom, and a group wedding of five couples together, so on.

Voices for Equality and Gender Construction

Gender disparities along with low-caste treatment and suppression at work places collectively make hell out of their lives. The ratio of domestic violence in Dalit community is very high whereas the society doesn’t give them the chance to speak and go for renaissance. In *Sangati*, Bama has depicted the angst of Dalit women who are not allowed to raise their voices in front of men and meant to bear dishonor.

Through the narrator in the book, Bama has tried to give voice and courage to all Dalit women to break the silence and construct their identity. For example, the narrator was flooded with questions related to patriarchal mind set of people regarding women and men being wrong and right after the humiliation Mariamma faced at the village council because of Kumarasami’s false allegations. Further she angrily asked her Paatti, “*you are a big woman in the village, why couldn’t*

you have gone and spoken the truth..?” (Bama: 28) Indeed for her grandmother was an important woman in the village who was present at every household when a child was born there and she was an overseer of all women workers for getting them work and their daily wages. But her grandmother knew the reality and answered to her,

“You talk as if it’s all a game. Big woman, small woman, nonsense! Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four five men? Should you even do it? When we were little ones, if ever there was a meeting, we just stayed inside our homes and drank our kanji. But just look at what goes on nowadays. Even small children and young girls turn out to watch the fun What do we know about justice? From our ancestors’ time it has been agreed that the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learnt a few letters of the alphabet.” (Bama: 28-29)

Not being satiated with her grandmother’s answers, she further asked, *“does that mean whatever men say is bound to be right? And whatever women say will always be wrong?”* (Bama: 29) Her Paatti answered to her queries that it is better for the women to be quiet whether they are right or wrong. She added, *“You’ll only get kicked and beaten and trampled on for your pains. And it isn’t just here that it happens, you know. It’s the same throughout the world. Women are not given that kind of respect.”* (Bama: 29) But not agreed with the answer, what her grandmother gave, she confronts with her grandmother telling her that they as women are responsible for this all gender bias societal behavior. She blames and asserts saying, *“from the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It’s you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other.”* (Bama: 29) She further asked,

“Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You will tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings?” (Bama: 29)

On humanitarian ground what Bama asks through the narrator’s question, she tries to make women of her community realize that they are also human beings and deserve rights of equality. Further, after listening lots of stories of pey catching only Dalit women in particular, Bama tries to aware uneducated women of her community by saying,

“It is up to us to be aware of our situation, and not fool ourselves that we have been possessed by peys. We must be strong. We must show our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence....we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive.” (Bama: 59)

Juliet Mitchell calls it consciousness-raising what Bama has also tried to do by writing stories of her community women to make them aware to raise their voices against suppression. Mitchell tells,

“The process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of women into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle of proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the political –this process is consciousness-raising.” (Mitchell: 61)

Sangati is the voices of Dalit women who speak or address to each other sharing their daily lives’ activities. Their voices sometimes rose in anger or in anguish when talk to each other or sometime against their suppressors, upper caste

men or men in the family. Bama justified the usage of a language “full of expletives” giving psychological reasons behind it that sometimes a sarcastic tongue and explicit lewd words are a woman’s only weapon for disgracing men and fleeing severe physical torture done by them. (Holmstrom: xx) Such particular language usage is a reflection of a wearisomescarcity of delightful experiences in their lives; the outcomes of suppression they face due to patriarchy based on gender power and caste dominance. Except sharpness in tone, Bama has exhibited the vigorous nature of the language of women of her community and the lovingness for proverbs, folk songs and folklore. Bama told that there are special songs from birth to death and it is only the women who sing them. Through these songs Dalit women try to rejuvenate them. For example- a song sung at a girl’s coming-of-age ceremony,

*“On a Friday morning, at earliest dawn
She became a pushpavati, so the elders said-
Her mother was delighted, her father too,
The uncles arrived, all in row-”* (Bama: 17)

Bama has given many more examples of witty songs and verses fit to the situations accordingly as one song says that the husband beats his wife while she was carrying a child and the physical torture she had to suffer just because she ate before his arrival at home,

*“Crab, Ocrab, my pretty little crab
Who wandered through all the fields I planted,
I pulled off your claws and put you in the pot
I gave you the pot a boil and set it down.
I waited and waited for him to come home
And began to eat as he came through the door
He came to hit me, the hungry brute
He pounced at me to kill me
He struck me, he struck my child
He almost crushed the baby in my womb
He beat me until my legs buckled
He thrashed me until my bangles smashed.”* (Bama: 30)

Bama voices for all those women whose lives are “wilt and shrivel up because of their pain and suffering” due to “blows and beatings: shame and humiliation.” (Bama: 118) Bama exerts awaking women of her society saying that if we had a little schooling, their lives would have been better than being “slaves” although “being a Dalit creates a problem” even if you have education and try to get a good job. (Bama: 118-119) at the top, “being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult”, moreover, “an unmarried Dalit woman”, as people “hesitate to rent houses to Dalits” and one has to hide her own identity. (Bama: 120) Upper caste women don’t face such problem but Dalit women are “denied the basic rights to

pay” their own hard earned money to rent a house. (Bama: 121)

Bama puts forward her opinions logically saying that if all Dalit women collectively should give vote to the right person flinging “away the beggarly coins the party workers” give them and elect their own MLA from their own community and demand their rights of equality which are due to them related to health care, education, labour and entertainment etc. (Bama: 103)

Except through the fictional works, in reality also Dalit women from many Asian countries are raising their voices consciously standing up together for their rights of equality. The current updates, videos, pictures and accounts of happenings are given on the website of IDSIN. One image as shown below where Dalit women have stood together to awake the whole globe to support them in the movements for their rights:



They are asking the international community and people of the world to come together and stand beside them, and to speak up to end the global silence that is allowing this gruesome form of discrimination to persist.

Figure 1: Dalit Women Raising Their Voices Collectively

(<http://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/>)

On the platform of International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSIN), many national Dalit Solidarity networks from Europe and other caste-affected countries like India and Nepal, many national and international development agencies, groups working for human rights internationally with involvement of the UN and the EU have lobbied to work together with action oriented advances to remove ‘untouchability’ as caste discrimination and to spread awareness regarding Dalit women’s issues as critical human rights issues. Several UN human right bodies and the UN rapporteurs have raised their concern regarding Dalit women’s issues and their rights of equality, added, many public figures have expressed their views on the website of IDSIN as shown below:

Navi Pillay, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Our outrage is not enough. We must take real and focused action to mend our societies’ dramatic failure to support the rights of people of discriminated castes, particularly women and girls.

UN Women Policy Director, Saraswathi Menon

We want to capture that women are targeted for punitive violence when they transgress caste, by the community, and when seeking to organise and defend their rights and the rights of others.

Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Rashida Manjoo

The intergenerational nature of caste discrimination condemns women to a life of exclusion, marginalization and disadvantage in every sphere of life. Many of those women are denied an education and economic opportunities, and perform dangerous and unprotected work, including ... modern forms of slavery.

Manisha Devi, a young Dalit activist who has been a leading figure in two month-long marches for Dalit women's rights.

I will raise my voice against any injustice even at the expense of my own life.

Figure 2: Statements Posted on IDSIN Platform

(<http://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/>)

Like Manisha Devi, a young Dalit activist, Bama also admits, *“if we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us.”* (Bama: 66) Therefore without caring whether they *“die or survive”*, Dalit women must stand up for them without fear and declare that they are *“too human beings like everyone else.”* (Bama: 66) Although it's male's manliness and dominance that takes preference and a female's body, brain, thoughts, actions, emotions and her entire life are all under a male's control and authority”, Bama messages to all Dalit women that they should realize their *“self-worth, honour, and self-respect”* to live on their own way. (Bama: 68) Finally with a ray of hope she ends her feminist discourse,

“there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them: with equal rights. Then injustices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that ‘women can make and women can break’.” (Bama: 123)

CONCLUSIONS

Experiences of Bama Faustina as a Dalit woman and her thoughts about the existent issues of women in her community that comprise of the problems of education of girls, wife or daughter's beating, sexual abuse and dishonor, woman workforce and their daily pays, constrained activities, the liability of maternity and parentage etc. all create her feminist insight while simultaneously her work appears emphasizing the hardiness, strong enthusiasm and untiring life-force of Dalit women to surpass all the obstacles and outlive through *“solidarity in the most un-patriarchal condition without male protection and man's earning”*. (Sailpar: 479) This research paper is a modest attempt to trigger the literature students and scholars who like to study and research combining interdisciplinary issues hence it covers several disciplines like sociology, psychology, gender studies, and literature etc. With humanistic approach it will prove valuable in spreading awareness about Dalit women's sufferings and their humiliation with frequent fear of being abused what they have to face due to orthodox mindset in Asian countries like India. Hopefully, in future, more humanitarians and organizations would come ahead to support Dalit women in their fights to make their voices loud enough for their human rights of equality and stand by for altering folks' mentality in the societies not to suppress them further.

ENDNOTES

- Dr BhimRao Ambedkar, is a draftsman of Indian Constitution; widely famous statesman who fought for the rights of equality of the Dalits and other socially oppressed classes.
- From the 1972 Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers, quoted in Tamil in Gail Omvedt, 'Dalit Peenterkal, Tamil ilakkiyam, penkal' (Dalit Panthers, Tamil literature, women) in Nirappirikai (Pondicherry), special edition (Nov. 1994), pp 3-7.
- Naattamai is the headman of Paraiya community
- Paatti means grandmother in Dalit Tamil Dialect.
- Paraiya is a lower caste community in India.
- Pushpavati is the day a girl blossoms or coming of age of a girl which is celebrated in Paraiya community.
- *Tali* is a neck-let and *tali's tying* is a central rite in the wedding ceremony. It has the same significance for Christians as for Hindus.

- *Kanji* is a word spoken in Dalit Tamil Dialect that means thin gruel of rice or other grains or just the starchy water drained from cooked rice.

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